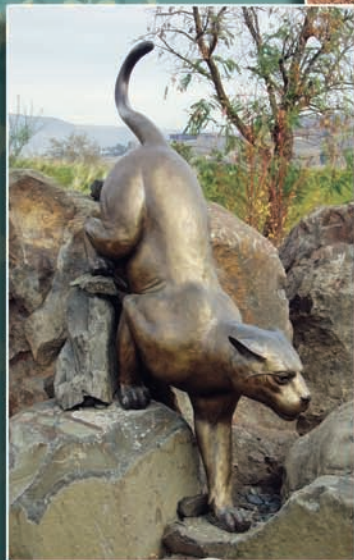


Inven Story: FINDING PUBLIC ART IN IDAHO



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In addition to oral and written histories, the narratives of Idaho and its people are found in artwork that adorns its streets, plazas, and public buildings. Recognizing the value of collecting and sharing this Idaho legacy, in October 2005 the Idaho Commission on the Arts launched *InvenStory* to provide greater resident access to such artwork. The Commission hired field researchers to comb each of the state's seven geographical regions for public art. They were instructed to identify such art, photograph it, and collect relevant information about its origin, meaning, funding, and current condition.

By June 2006, they had located about 650 artworks. Commission staff compiled the results, and the public art manager at the Boise City Arts Commission reviewed and assessed the outcome.



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what is public art?

Although humorist Dave Barry has defined public art as “art that is purchased by experts who are not spending their own personal money,” the Commission settled on a broader (and different) definition: “Original artwork of any medium, publicly or privately funded, that is accessible to the public.” Most commonly, such art in Idaho consists of sculpture and murals.

The Commission excluded original artwork framed on a wall because it is better classified as “portable” than as “public.” Context is an important factor. A further consideration asked of the fieldworkers was how the art is connected to its location and its audience.

Even so, field researchers encountered differentiating difficulties: some favored accommodation, documenting everything that appeared handmade; others were more restrictive, recording only work clearly within the definition. All were confronted at times with ambiguity – artworks that were both advertisements and original art; murals inside public buildings not obviously accessible to the general public.





who manages and funds public art in Idaho?

Although public art by some definitions has been an integral part of Idaho communities for nearly one hundred years, only recently have local cities initiated formal programs to fund and manage it. Coeur d'Alene was the first, passing a percent-for-art ordinance in 1999. "Percent-for-Art" means that a city allocates a percentage of each eligible municipal capital project for art, and that it has staff or volunteers capable of managing the artist selection, implementation of the process, and maintenance of such works. By October 2006, Boise, Rexburg, and Moscow had joined Coeur d'Alene in establishing percent-for-art ordinances.

As the data from the *InvenStory* reveals, there are numerous organizations and individuals that fund and manage public art, typically piece-by-piece in response to a particular opportunity, rather than as a comprehensive program. Government organizations, private businesses, religious organizations, service groups, and others have participated, often voluntarily, in the creation of public art in Idaho.

where is the art?

When reviewing data in this study from a comparative, statistical perspective, one must expect a margin of error based on the inability to find *all* public artworks in the researcher's region within the time allowed, as well as differing evaluations of what constituted public art. The data indicates that the highest concentration of that art is in the Southeast and Southwest regions. (More populated regions have more public art.)

Public art can be found on downtown street corners and on the exterior walls of private businesses. Airports, post offices, libraries, churches, courthouses, and city halls host such art, as do recreational facilities such as zoos, parks, and botanical gardens. Elementary and high schools, colleges, and community centers feature murals and sculptures. Sculpture in Idaho sometimes even carves its own surprising space in open fields, meadows, and along canyon rims.





Types of public art

The most popular focus for public art in Idaho is work that reflects the heritage and history of Idaho residents. Heritage is manifested in many forms. In St. Maries, for instance, a series of colorful murals celebrate its early-1900 railroad and logging enterprises, along with those of tugboats and steamboats. *InvenStory* located eight W.P.A. murals from the 1930s still enriching post offices and courthouses around the state. Whether painted or ceramic, murals relate our history of Native Americans and pioneer settlers, of exploration and cultivation and irrigation. Public art with historical content at least informs newcomers of where they are and old-timers of where their roots are anchored – even though their surroundings inevitably change.

Numerous artistic public memorials commemorate past wars or their fallen soldiers. More often than not, however, artists usually commemorate people who have a local connection, resorting to realistic sculptures – Sacagawea, Lieutenant John Mullan, Governor Frank Stuenenberg, Ernest Hemmingway, Lionel Hampton, for example. And reflecting a national tendency, the more modern or



abstract artworks are usually found on university campuses or adjacent to arts institutions.

Landscapes and wildlife, in general, rank as the second-most popular category of public art in Idaho: the land with its rivers, lakes, and forested mountains, its birds and animals.

Recently, several Idaho cities have commissioned artists to design functional pieces for civic spaces: doors, fences, benches, bike racks, transit shelters, even bridges. Some public art, in contrast, reveals an unexpected relationship with another culture: an Idaho Falls park ornamented with lanterns made in Japan – created and donated by its sister-city in Tokai Mura; a city block in downtown Boise graced with Basque cultural symbols announcing strong ties to its sister-city in the Basque Country, Gernika.

The range in content is complemented or constrained, depending on one's view, by the range in artistic quality. Understandably, art created or designed by students differs from the more polished, professional artwork of locally or nationally-acclaimed artists. As one field researcher wryly observed, "There are lots





of bad murals of mountains next to spectacular views of real mountains.”

public art project budgets

Because of a dearth of historical records, the original costs for many public artworks in the state could not be ascertained, and since many of the works are not insured, this value is impossible to determine. Of those works for which the Commission does have documentation, the values range from \$250 to \$250,000. (Most of the 600-plus artworks fall in the \$5,000 to \$25,000 range.)

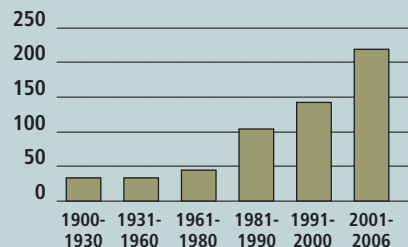


Maintenance and conservation

Artworks indisputedly owned by an organization such as a municipality, service group, or private business have a better chance at conservation than the mural on a side of a building that has changed hands without provisions to protect or repair it. In the field researchers’ documentation there are numerous records of deteriorating murals. The lesson is obvious: Where longevity is desirable, public art owners and community groups need to plan for the maintenance and conservation of the

existing works and provide for maintenance when commissioning new work. And since most of the artworks catalogued with dates were made in the last twenty-five years, look for exponential maintenance demands in the future.

Completion of New Public Artworks in Idaho



where do we go from here?

The Commission will continue to be a source for public art information, training, and resources. A network of regional experts will advise and train local public art project managers about public art processes, selection of artists, and planning for the conservation of such works.

InvenStory is both baseline and beginning, and although it will be refined and updated, it reveals for the first time how





ARTWORK

(location, title or subject, artist if known)

Cover:

Lewiston, lion sculpture, Caswell; Boise, *Spring Run* (detail), Lysohir; Driggs, *Buffalo Family*, Simms

Inside Cover:

Weippe, Lewis & Clark mural, Cooke; Coeur d'Alene, *Guardian of the Lake*, Powell; Sandpoint, Statue of Liberty

Page 1:

Twin Falls, *The Crack*, Wray

Page 2:

Cottonwood, *Sweet Willy and Toby*, Sullivan & Conklin; Castleford, Challenge Butcher mural; St. Anthony, WPA mural, Lochrie

Page 3:

Idaho Falls, sculpture, American Indian, Toth; Payette, bull elk sculpture; Ketchum, *Prayer Wheel*, Mosco

Page 4:

McCall, *The Bearing Wall*; Geneva, sculpture; Boise, *A River of Trees* (detail), Caldwell; Ahsahka, fish egg sculpture, Driskell

Page 5:

Malad, Vietnam Veterans memorial, Lewis; Mountain Home, Savemore Drug mural, Miller; Boise, Trolley House mural, Pierce brothers

Page 6:

Boise, Basque mural (detail); Moscow, *Pore d' Espine*, Jellum; Idaho Falls, *Fish in River*, Russell

Page 7:

Pocatello, barn mural, Moeller; Twin Falls, John Wayne mural

extensive the tradition of public art is in Idaho, and why, furthermore, this remarkable heritage should be shared with all residents well into the future.

"Though it won't pave the streets or synchronize the traffic signals, [public art] will add stateliness and elegance to the heart of the city. It will remind us of who we are and where we've been. That has special and enduring value."

– Times-News, Twin Falls



Page 8:

Twin Falls, *Olmec Head*, Herrett & Parkins; Rexburg, *A Monument to Education*, Fraughton; Boise, *Les Bois*, Proksa

Inside back cover:

Lewiston, *Two Nations Meet on the Kooskie River*, Govedare & Powell

Back cover:

Boise, *Alley History*, Moosman; Moscow, fire hose sculpture, Pepper; St. Maries, *1910 Fire*, Brown; Whitney, painted barn, Beckstead

